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“E-Business and Higher Education”

An Exercise In Marketing or Fulfilling an Academic Need?

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FOLLOWING THE MARKET

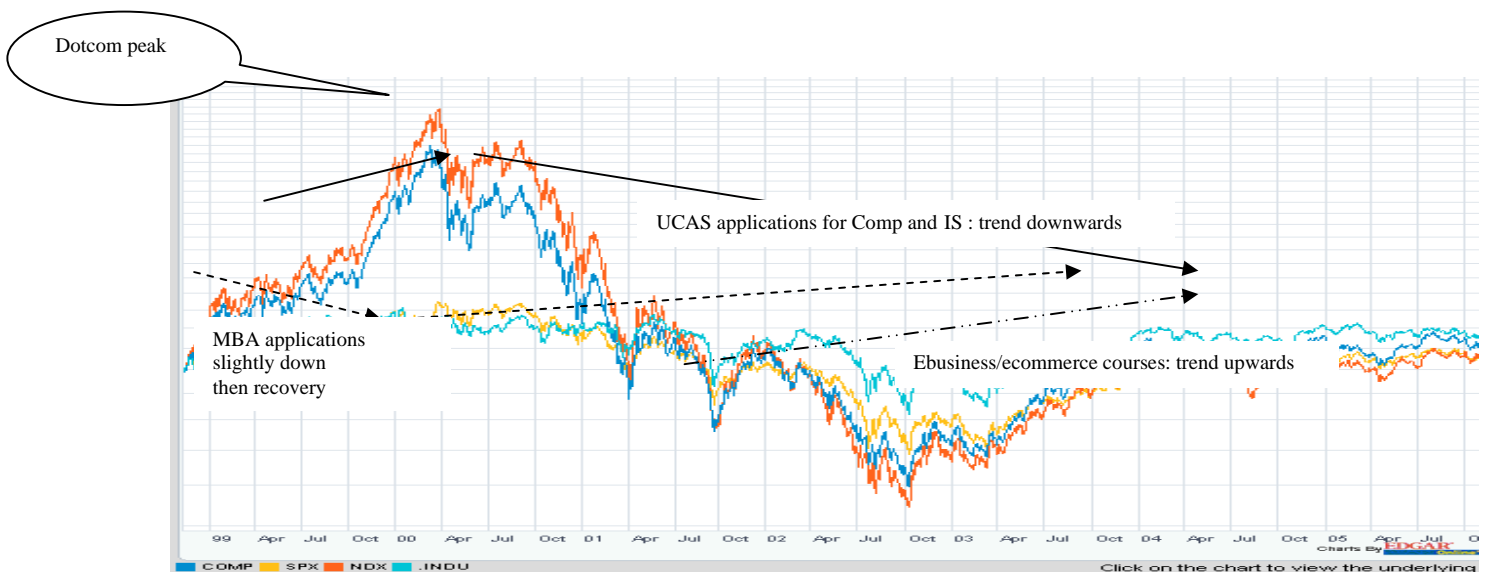
Last few years : increase in E-Business and E-Commerce courses.

Equip students to exploit new technologies and capitalise on growth in demand for skills ‘perceived’ from media attention to:

- ecommerce start-ups,
- burgeoning dotcom share prices,
- new ‘killer applications’,
- and basically all things internet.

“Two years ago the business school community around the world was in a quiet panic. Applications for MBA programmes were down for the first time since the second world war. The reason? The internet gold rush”
Adrian Barrett, Guardian newspaper, 2001

BUT fortunes of such courses closely linked to boom/bust of dot com economy and by 2001 dot com boom ended. Since then applications to computing and mathematical courses falling and for Computing and Information Systems down by 18% in 2003-2004 and 9% in 2004-05).



SO WHAT WAS BEING OFFERED IN ACADEMIA ?

Some e-prefix courses (E-Business, E-Commerce, Etechnology) were:

- re-hashes of existing courses and newly 'badged',
- innovative and significant with technological/commercial potential.

“Within this subject area (ecommerce) there is also a clear and perhaps understandable difference between the balance of the business and computing content of the course depending on which department/school were offering the course. The fact that such differentiation exists could indicate that E-Commerce as a subject area is itself diverse ...”

Dastbaz & Flynn (2002)

93 different titles, some based in Computing/IT and some in Business. Students would not benefit from business and IT rivalry.

UNIV.	TITLE OF PROGRAMME	COURSES WITH E-PREFIXED TITLES
Westminster	e-Commerce	2
Derby	E-Commerce Management	5
Coventry	e-Commerce	2 of which one double unit = 3
Kingston	e-Commerce	4 (incl Cyber Marketing)
Queen Mary	eCommerce Eng. In Bus. Envent	0
Birkbeck	eCommerce	4
Essex	eCommerce technology	3
Buckingham	eCommerce	4
Greenwich	eCommerce	0
Middlesex	eCommerce	3 incl 'Internet' and 'Cyber
South Bank	eCommerce	2
APU	eCommerce	5 incl 'Internet Commerce'

THE DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR NEEDS

Clear need for a better understanding of:

- what such courses need in them.
- how to better links between IT and Business educators.
- what such courses require for the different stakeholders:
 - (i) prospective students
 - (ii) prospective employers
 - (iii) professional bodies
 - (iv) academics.

Prospective Students

Applications follow general employment trends as per press and media. What else can students go by? They, their parents, and school mentors, can only judge by how subject areas are publicly perceived and reported.

Employers

Accepting that ecommerce/ebusiness not just flavour-of-the-month. New ways of trading via internet here to stay - become the norm ?

According to Unilever's director of electronic commerce, Martin Armitage, e-business affects internal processes, partners, customers and suppliers. For Unilever, e-business is just business, it pervades the whole of the organisation; it is paramount and pervasive.

Bicknel D. 2000 Computer Weekly

Professional Bodies

Many identify a need for diverse skills.

Concept of the 'hybrid manager'.

Concept of general 'bridger' between IT and business.

'Bridgers don't just bridge the gap and liaise between business and IT ...they're like entrepreneurs creating added value that just wouldn't be there otherwise ... helping businesses understand how IT fits and supports business strategy; ... helping to build business strategy with information systems embedded; Bridgers must have a wider perspective than any particular application or technology set and they need the organizational and people skills to break down barriers between IT and business and educate business about IT and IT about business.. they must have the confidence of both sides.

BCS ITNow 2005 interview, Christine Ashton co-founder of BCS Business-IT Interface Specialist group and Chief Information Manager British Petroleum

Academia

- Unsure when new disciplines rise especially disparate subjects.
- Has concerns of theoretical and research underpinnings.
- May still think C.P. Snow's 'Two Cultures' still alive?

Major, L. (2001). *Education: higher: Masters of what? As universities offer increasingly flexible business courses to attract students already in work, inspectors face a growing struggle to monitor academic standards.*).

So, in a nutshell, there is :

PUSH from the marketplace - students want jobs in new market niches,
PUSH from employers wanting staff with wide range of skills
PUSH from professional bodies wanting professional skills.
PUSH from academics wanting integrated coherent defensible subject.

E-PREFIX COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH

In 2002 the UoG Information Systems department launched first undergraduate Etechnology to meet three essential criteria:

1. it would deliver a diverse subject range as required by jobs marketplace : HOW? by reviewing advertised job vacancies in relevant media eg Computing Weekly, Computing etc.
2. subject range would be integrated to allay concerns over academic credibility : HOW? –by review from members of professional bodies eg ISACA suggested security issues and legal compliance were pertinent.
3. it would deliver professional skill-set of ‘bridging’ skills : HOW? by including exercises on consultancy, setting up own business, report writing etc.

Breakdown of course material (18 lectures).

Indicative Content	No of Lectures	% of Total Lectures	Approach Taken
Business: general	2	12%	Academic
Business: Setting Up A Business	3	16%	Professional (hands-on, practical)
Management	2	12%	Academic
Law	3	16%	Academic
Technology: Encryption technology	3	16%	Academic
Technology: Network Security	5	28%	Professional (hands-on, practical)

In 2004 this course had 183 students. Largest final year course.
Student cohort extremely diverse.

Programme Name	% of Cohort
BSc Computing Science	9.8%
BSc Computing	40.7%
BSc Computing With Business (75/25)	8.2%
BSc Information Systems	11.8%
BSc Information Systems with Business (75/25)	5.7%
BSc Business Information Technology	23.7%
Others	1.5%

Findings of End-Of-Year Questionnaire

Survey Question	Replies		
Was the proportion of business topics?	Too little: 10%	About Right: 82%	Too Much; 8%
Was the proportion of technology topics	Too little: 10%	About Right: 72%	Too Much: 18%
Was the proportion of law topics:	Too little: 21%	About Right: 79%	Too Much: 0%
Was the proportion of Management topics:	Too little: 8%	About Right: 70%	Too Much: 22%

Did you consider the law topics to be relevant and interesting?	Yes: 98%	No:2%	No Comment: 0%
Did you consider that the lectures on starting your own business were relevant and interesting to you?	Yes: 91%	No: 8%	No Comment: 1%
Overall, do you think the course met its stated aims of integrating business and technology topics, providing marketable skills, and providing useful professional skills. ?	Yes: 94%	No:5%	No Comment: 1%
Would you recommend this course to your friends?	Yes: 92%	No: 8%	No Comment: 0%

What initially attracted you to this course?	Most comments were favourable. Answers ranged from mix of subjects, marketable skills, practical. Curiously, nobody explicitly stated that it seemed to them to be easier than the other options!
What did you not like about the course?	Very few comments and mainly about 'too much technology',

Conclusion

Large number of students, option for 70%, : so highly popular.

From survey, course has met the criteria as defined above i.e. :-

- breadth of subject matter meets real-world job-centred skill-sets
- professional skills to meet ‘bridging’ of IT and business areas.
- integration of material.

However, have we achieved third criteria of integration of different academic disciplines into coherent academically defensible subject area?

What is an academically defensible subject area? Is it something that:

- is wanted by business,
- has a well-defined research portfolio and brings in grants,
- is worth the study because interesting in it’s own right,
- is worth the study because may be of use to future generations,
- students want for whatever reason,
- fills otherwise empty seats in universities competing for survival?

Perhaps now, with demands of fast growing/fast changing world markets the economic imperative can force acceptance of academic subject areas that span traditional subject areas and meet market requirements.

Maybe , too, time for universities to share experience to define good practice in new areas with an interdisciplinary network linking academics active in this field with one another and with counterparts in industry and in the public sector.

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